

The University of Chicago

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MONASTIC WORSHIP

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1937

By
MASSEY HAMILTON SHEPHERD, JR.

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Two major developments marked the history of Christianity in the fourth century. On the one hand, the Church became definitely allied to the political and social order under the aegis of the emperor and won a decisive victory over all competitors as the favored religion of the state. On the other hand, the rapid rise of monasticism exhibited a religious temper distrustful of all ties with the world of ordinary affairs and desirous of seeking the comforts of religion in desert sands and mountainous wildernesses apart from the centers of cultural and social commerce. These contrasting religious developments found expression in diverse forms of worship. In the Church worship under the control of an official hierarchy the sacramental mystery of the Eucharist was elaborated and adorned with all the newly-baptized arts of pagan culture, and guaranteed in its efficacy by an increasing crystallization of authoritative dogma. Among the early monks, on the contrary, worship was informal and little attached to external symbols as avenues of approach to divine communion. Monastic worship was *logical* rather than *dramatic*, it was *contemplative* rather than *actual*. It employed neither sacrifice nor sacrament. Its instruments were psalmody, prayer, and the reading of Holy Scripture.

I

In the monastic literature of the fourth and fifth centuries the aim of worship was conceived to be a mystical experience of God, direct and immediate, to which one "ascended" by means of contemplation upon the holy thoughts presented to the mind in the psalm-singing, prayers, and Scripture readings. The highest stage of this ascent was a state of indescribable rapture, marked by no visible image or audible sound, but lighted with a heavenly light imparting a vision and knowledge of God and a foretaste of bliss in the life beyond death. Such an experience of ecstasy could only be obtained when one was pure from all bodily passion, tranquil in mind, and free from all distraction of the senses. To achieve it required the discipline of asceticism and the exercise of virtuous living.

A few quotations selected at random from the vast body of literature will make this theory of worship apparent. Cassian reports that in his conference with Abbot Isaac in the lower Egyptian desert the old monk spoke of

that ardent prayer which is known and tried by but very few, and which to speak more truly is ineffable; which transcends all human thoughts, and is distinguished, I will not say by any sound of the voice, but by no movement of the tongue, or utterance of words, but which the mind enlightened by the infusion of that heavenly light describes in no human and confined language, but pours forth richly as from a copious fountain in an accumulation of thoughts, and ineffably utters to God, expressing in the shortest possible space of time such great things that the mind when it returns to its usual condition cannot easily utter or relate.¹

In the *Historia monachorum* the monk John is reported as saying to his visitors:

You also, O children, pursue after quietness, ever exercising yourselves in contemplation, in order that you may possess a pure mind when praying to God. . . . For fine is that man, yea, exceedingly fine, who is engaged in practical matters and keeps the commandments, and is busy in earthly matters. But better and mightier than he is that contemplative man who flees from practical matters to the things of the mind, leaving to others the consideration of such things; but he, denying himself and forgetting himself, is busy about heavenly things. Easily loosed from all earthly ties, he stands close to God,

¹ *Collationes* ix. 25 (trans. Gibson).

having no anxiety about other things. For such a one lives, with God, and communes with God, ever hymning Him with unending hymns.²

St Nilus, who became a monk in 390 and was later abbot of a monastery in Ancyra, Galatia, described ecstatic prayer:

The highest prayer of the perfect is a certain seizure of mind and a complete ecstasy out of the senses, while the spirit with unspeakable groans converses with God, who looks upon the state of the heart, unrolled, as it were, like a written book, and showing forth its own will and purpose with voiceless figures.³

Finally, we append some remarks of St Basil, the great legislator of Eastern monasticism, concerning the purpose of hymns, Scripture reading and prayer:

Pious exercises nourish the soul with divine thoughts. . . . Soothing hymns compose the mind to a cheerful and calm state. Quiet, then, as I have said, is the first step in our sanctification. . . . Thus the mind, saved from dissipation from without, and not through the senses thrown upon the world, falls back upon itself, and thereby ascends to the contemplation of God.

The study of inspired Scripture is the chief way of finding our duty, for in it we find both instruction about conduct and the lives of blessed men, delivered in writing, as some breathing images of godly living, for the imitation of their good works. . . .

Prayers, too, after reading, find the soul fresher, and more vigorously stirred by love towards God. And that prayer is good which imprints a clear idea of God in the soul: and the having God established in self by means of memory is God's indwelling.⁴

A mystical type of worship, such as that cultivated by the monks, was of an individualistic nature. Even after common worship services among them became well-established and ordered the monks performed most of their devotions in private, or at least in very small groups. In this way each monk could order his worship to suit his own taste and needs. Yet common services furnished the model for private devotions, and were highly esteemed as sources of mutual encouragement and helpfulness in attaining the common goal of contemplation of God. At-

² 1 (ed. by E. Preuschen, *Palladius und Rufinus, Ein Beitrag zur Quellenkunde des ältesten Mönchtums* [Giessen, 1897]. Cf. the Latin recension in *P. L.* XXI, 404).

³ *De voluntaria paupertate* 27 (*P. G.* LXXIX, 1004).

⁴ *Epistolae* ii. 2-4 (trans. Jackson).

tendance upon them was rigidly enforced, and suspension from common prayers was considered the most severe punishment.⁵ In Egypt, where the climate favored eremitical organization and a minimum of regulation, the monks only assembled for worship in a body on Saturdays and Sundays, when they also received the Holy Communion.⁶ Yet each monk was expected on other days of the week to say prescribed matins and vespers offices, and in the more organized Pachomian communities of upper Egypt an additional office at midnight. These offices, however, were of only moderate length that the more ardent might not be unduly kept away from their private spiritual exercises.⁷

As an example of a typical monastic service of common worship let us take matins as conducted by the monks of lower Egypt, and described in some detail by Cassian, an eye-witness of them. In essential structure this service in no way differs from the more elaborately prescribed and highly stylized offices outlined in the *Rule* of St Benedict of Nursia (early sixth century), which has formed the basis of monastic worship in the West to the present day. In the East, thanks to St Basil, the offices were left flexible and without a fixed routine of psalms or prayers.⁸ At the direction of the senior a monk opened the service by standing and singing a psalm. The other monks sat in silent attentiveness until he finished, then arose and stood with outstretched arms while a short prayer was offered by the leader. After the prayer all made a brief prostration. This procedure was followed until twelve psalms with their prayers had been completed. At the conclusion of the twelfth psalm, all sang together the *Gloria Patri*. Never more than four monks led in psalmody during a single service. After the psalmody two Scripture lessons were read, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. At the Saturday and Sunday synaxes both lessons were from the New Testa-

⁵ Cassian *De institutis* ii. 15-16; Palladius *Historia Lausiaca* 33; *Regula S. Pachonii*, Praecepta 9-11 (ed. Amand Boon, pp. 15-16).

⁶ *Hist. mon.* 22 (Latin), 23 (Greek); Palladius *Hist. Laus.* 7; 32; Cassian *Coll.* iii. 1-2; xviii. 15; xxiii. 21; Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* iii. 14.

⁷ Cassian *De inst.* ii. 12-13; Palladius *Hist. Laus.* 32.

⁸ *Regulae fusius tractatae* 37 (trans. Clarke).

ment. Also during Eastertide both lessons were taken from the New Testament, and there was no kneeling at prayer. Sometimes a homily followed, delivered by the senior.⁹ The prayers at the services were of four types (based on I Timothy 2:1): penitential, votive, intercessory, and thanksgiving.

II

The similarity of structure and content between the monastic service just outlined and that of the ancient Jewish synagogue is at once apparent. Both contained the same elements and were based upon the Scriptures for the materials of prayer, song, and sacred instruction. Both services were democratic and laic in spirit and practice; no priest or ecclesiastical dignitary was needed to conduct them. Just as the synagogue worship was independent of the temple sacrificial cultus, so the devotional services of the monks were not a part of the sacramental rites of the Church. In neither case, however, was the service of prayer and praise considered a rival to or substitute for the official cultus; though in the case of Judaism, the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. left the synagogue as the only place providing public worship for Jews. This indeed it had always been to a great extent in the Diaspora. After 70 A.D. the synagogue took over many features of the temple services as well as much of their terminology. The later rabbis considered prayer and fasting to be a substitute for sacrifice.¹⁰

There were similarities in detail between the synagogue and monastic worship. Neither had a fixed liturgy; the leader led in the subject of prayer, which each individual elaborated in silence according to his own particular needs. In the synagogue service, for example, after the great prayer of the *Shemoneh Ezreh*, the words of which were not written down until the fourth or fifth century, A.D., opportunity was given each one to offer private petitions (known as *Tachanunim*). These petitions were generally penitential and modelled on Daniel 9:3ff.¹¹

⁹ Cassian *De inst.* ii. 2ff.

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakoth*, 17a, 26b, 32b.

¹¹ Tosephta, *Berakoth*, III, 6; Babylonian Talmud, *Berakoth*, 31a.

The parallels between Jewish and monastic worship end, however, in their similarity of structure and content. In the basic religious experience which underlay them the two were entirely different. The monk sang Psalms, read Scripture, and prayed in the language of the sacred text in order to store his mind with thoughts appropriate for the entrance of divine light in mystic contemplation. The Jew filled his mind with the inspired Word that by knowledge of the divinely-revealed *Torah* he might walk in righteousness before God. To the Jew, the meaning of worship was primarily ethical, never mystical. Praise and thanksgiving were offered God as creator and provider of man's needs, and confession and repentance made to Him as the judge of man's sins and rewarder of man's obedience to his will. Not only as regards individual piety, but also in their corporate character, the two were different. To the monks the value of corporate worship lay in the mutual stimulation which their fellowship gave towards the endeavor to attain the object of a common desire. In Judaism it had a more national, even political significance, in the confession of national sin, in the hope of national restoration and the universal acceptance of God's sovereignty, and in thanksgiving for God's choice and guidance of his chosen people Israel.

Even amongst Jewish ascetic groups the ethical implications of worship were of primary significance. In the case of the Essenes we are informed that it was their custom to arise before daylight and spend a period of time in meditation. At sunrise they "offered certain traditional prayers of their forefathers, as though beseeching the sun to rise."¹² This was hardly an act of sun-worship, but simply a prayer that God might send the light of the sun so that they might begin their day's work. Perhaps we have in this custom an echo of "the pious" (*Hasidim*) of pre-Maccabean times, who "used to wait an hour before they said the *Tefillah*, that they might direct their heart toward God."¹³ Or it may have looked back to certain other "pious" ones, known

¹² Josephus *De bello Judaico* ii. 8.5.

¹³ Mishnah, *Berakoth* V, 1; cf. Babylonian Talmud, *Berakoth*, 32b.

in the Talmud as *Watikim*, who arranged their morning prayers so as to finish the *Shema* exactly at sunrise.¹⁴

About eleven o'clock in the morning they gathered together for a common meal, for which they especially prepared by a cold bath and the donning of white veils. A similar meal in the evening was followed by a period of mutual exhortation. Grace was said before and after each meal. There is no reason to see in these gatherings a "sacramental" or "mystery" cult.¹⁵ They may be adequately explained by the sect's communistic way of living, their rigorous efforts to preserve the Levitical laws of ceremonial cleanness, and the common Jewish custom of saying benedictions before and after meals.¹⁶

The Essenes rejected the practice of animal sacrifice, and for this reason were excluded from the temple at Jerusalem. They did send to the temple votive offerings, probably in the form of incense.¹⁷ In this custom they were following to a logical conclusion much of the teaching of the prophets. On Sabbaths they assembled for a service similar to that held in the synagogues. One of their number would read from the sacred books; another interpreted. Philo said that they taught "piety, and holiness, and justice, and economy, and the science of regulating the state, and the knowledge of such things as are naturally good, or bad, or indifferent, and to choose what is right and to avoid what is wrong, using a threefold variety of definitions, and rules, and criteria, namely, the love of God, and the love of virtue, and the love of mankind." In other words, they emphasized moral philosophy, not metaphysics or natural science.¹⁸ To what extent their studies were based upon non-Scriptural books, it is difficult to say. Philo said they were their ancestral laws; Josephus said the writings of the ancients. Hippolytus, whose account of them

¹⁴ *Berakoth*, 9b; cf. Wisdom 16: 28, II Macc. 10: 28.

¹⁵ As does W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (3d ed.; Tübingen, 1926), pp. 461-2.

¹⁶ For these benedictions, see Mishnah, *Berakoth*, VI, 1-3.

¹⁷ ἀναθήματα, Josephus *Antiquitates* xviii. 1.5; cf. Philo *Quod omnis probus liber* 12.

¹⁸ *Quod omnis probus liber* 12 (trans. Yonge).

seems to have depended upon Josephus, more explicitly limited their books to "the Law and the Prophets and . . . whatever scroll of the faithful they have besides."¹⁹ They did have some peculiar esoteric lore, for Josephus said that "they inquire after such roots and medicinal stones as may cure their distempers," that they required neophytes to "preserve the books belonging to their sect, and the names of the angels," and that "there are also among them who undertake to foretell things to come, by reading the holy books, and using several sorts of purifications, and being perpetually conversant in the discourses of the prophets."²⁰ From these scant remarks it would appear that their peculiar interests had to do with apocalyptic speculations.

So far as the records go, then, the worship of the Essenes appears to have been quite similar both in content and religious meaning to that of the synagogue. The reading and exposition of Scripture was the heart of worship, and aimed towards stimulating moral character in harmony with the revealed will of God. In no sense was their worship mystical in the same way as that of the Christian monks.

The Therapeutae, an ascetic group of Diaspora Jews who inhabited the hills to the south of Lake Mareotis in Egypt, present a more difficult problem. Information concerning them is based solely upon a treatise of Philo, the *De vita contemplativa*. From remarks of Philo in other writings the phenomenon of ascetic groups of Jews who lived a life of solitude and contemplation in the desert was not limited solely to the Therapeutae.²¹ To separate the husk of Philo's interpretation of them from the core of fact is no easy task. To their "monasteries" in the desert the Therapeutae took "only the law and the oracles delivered under inspiration by the prophets along with the Psalms, and the other (books) by means of which religion and sound knowledge grow together into one perfect whole." At dawn and at eventide they

¹⁹ *Philosophumena* ix. 17.

²⁰ *De bello Judaico* ii. 8, 6-7, 12.

²¹ See the list of relevant passages given by F. C. Conybeare in his edition of the *De vita contemplativa* (Oxford, 1895), pp. 274-6.

would offer prayers—"at sunrise for a fair day for themselves, for the day, which is really fair, which meaneth that their minds be filled with heavenly light. But at sunset they pray that the soul be wholly relieved of the disorderly throng of the senses and of sensible things, and left free to track out and explore truth in its own conclave and council-chamber." The entire day they devoted to the study of the Scriptures and the composition of sacred hymns. Philo said that they interpreted the Scriptures allegorically with the help of commentaries written by the founders of the sect. "And these writings they use as exemplars of a kind, emulating the ideal of character traced out in them."

Only on Sabbaths did the Therapeutae meet together for a service of worship. After a discourse by the eldest and most learned, they would feast upon cheap bread, salt, hyssop and water. Every seven weeks they observed a high festival, similar to the Sabbath conclave, but extended in length so as to last all night. Hymns were sung by all in turn after the leader's exposition. The men and women arranged themselves into two choruses for singing and dancing in imitation of the dance of the children of Israel after crossing the Red Sea. "But the end and aim of thought and words and choristers alike is holiness." At dawn they offered their customary morning prayer and returned each to his own "monastery," there "to traffic in and cultivate afresh their customary philosophy."

At no time does Philo inform us that the purpose of worship among the Therapeutae was a mystical experience of ecstatic vision of God affording a foretaste of heavenly bliss. The aim of their worship was expressly stated to have been directed towards the development of moral character—certainly a Jewish characteristic. The heavenly light for which they prayed in their daily devotions was sought that it might illumine their minds in the search for truth and the better understanding of their sacred literature. It is, of course, easy to associate the desire for "light," coupled with an allegorical (i.e. spiritual) interpretation of religious writings, with the mystical proclivities of Philo and his Alexandrian milieu. But one suspects that here Philo's own

interpretation has crept in, just as his fondness for comparing their hymn-singing and dance to frenzied Bacchanals. It is perhaps safer, therefore, to look upon the Therapeutae as simply a band of hermit scholars and students of the Scriptures.²²

III

Pious Jews were accustomed to observe three times of daily prayer.²³ Generally these periods of devotion were conformed to the times of the daily public services—morning, noon (or afternoon) and evening. The *Shema* was required to be recited twice a day, "when thou liest down and when thou risest up," but the *Shemoneh Ezreh*, or *Tefillah* as it was customarily called, was said three times. The early Christians continued this Jewish custom of thrice daily prayer, but on Gentile soil observed them in accordance with the Roman divisions of the day at the third, sixth and ninth hours. These times were publicly announced for the benefit of business, especially legal procedures.²⁴ Christian piety very early associated them with traditions of the apostles or of the Lord's passion. According to Clement of Alexandria, the devotions at each period consisted of three prayers,²⁵ and probably included the Lord's Prayer.²⁶ The development of the "little day hours" under the influence of accepted divisions of the day did not supersede the older Jewish practice so much as it expanded it; for morning devotions "when one riseth up" and evening prayer "when one lieth down" were retained, quite

²² This is essentially the view of Conybeare and also of P. Wendland, "Die Therapeuten und die philonische Schrift vom beschaulichen Leben," *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie*, Suppl. Bd. XXII (1896), 748 ff.; cf. Bousset, *op. cit.*, p. 468.

²³ Ps. 55: 17; Dan. 6: 10; Mishnah, *Berakoth*, I, 1-2; IV, 1; Tosephta, *Berakoth*, III, 1, 6; Babylonian Talmud, *Berakoth*, 26b; Josephus *Ant.* iv. 8.13. See also O. Holtzmann, "Die täglichen Gebetsstunden im Judentum und Urchristentum," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, XII (1911), 90-108.

²⁴ Tertullian *De ieiunio* 10; cf. Seneca *Thyestes* 798.

²⁵ *Stromata* vii. 7.

²⁶ *Didache* 8; Origen *De oratione* 12.

naturally, in addition to the day hours.²⁷ Among the more earnest the custom began also of rising during the night to pray.²⁸

All these devotions were observed in private, and there is no evidence of their daily celebration in Church until the fourth century. It is true that "vigil" services came to be held during the second century on the so-called "station" days, Wednesday and Friday, and in the cemeteries on anniversaries of martyrs, in addition to the regular weekly "vigil" of the Lord's Day. In the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, dating from the early third century, the faithful were exhorted to observe *seven* periods of prayer in the course of every twenty-four hours: morning, third, sixth, ninth, bedtime, midnight, and cockcrow.²⁹ Here indeed one sees the system of canonical hours of the Divine Office, both secular and monastic. But it is noteworthy that only the morning prayer was said publicly, and that only on certain days when there was instruction at the Church. Prayer, song, and Bible reading were noted as the proper way to observe the periods of devotion.

As early as the time of Paul Christians believed physical abstinence to be an aid to more fervent prayer.³⁰ By the second century fasting was enjoined upon all the faithful on the special "station" days of Wednesday and Friday when, as stated above, special vigils were held.³¹ At the same time the number of Christian continents, both men and women, devoted to a life of prayer, began to grow apace.³² Widows of advanced age, who had only been married once, were regarded as a distinct order,

²⁷ Tertullian *De oratione* 25; Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* ii. 4; Cyprian *De dominica oratione* 35.

²⁸ Tertullian *Ad uxorem* ii. 5; Clement of Alex., *Paed.* ii. 9.

²⁹ 35-36. Cf. T. Shermann, *Die allgemeine Kirchenordnung, frühchristliche Liturgien und kirchliche Ueberlieferung* (Paderborn, 1914), I, 93-8.

³⁰ I Cor. 7: 5.

³¹ *Didache* 8; Hermas *Sim.* v. 1ff.; Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* vii. 12; Tertullian *De ieiunio* 2, 10-14, *De oratione* 19.

³² I Clement 38; Ignatius *Ad Polycarpum* 5; Hermas *Sim.* ix. 30; Justin *Apologia* i. 15; Athenagoras *Supplicatio pro Christianis* 33; Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* vii. 12; Tertullian *Apologeticus* 9, *De cultu feminarum* ii. 9; Origen *Homilia in Numeros* ii. 1; Minucius Felix *Octavius* 31.

and were noted for their continual "supplications and prayers night and day."³³ An interesting picture of the life of Christian ascetics in the early third century is afforded by the pseudo-Clementine epistles, *De virginitate*. Two types of ascetics were distinguished: (1) those who lived together in one place in separation from the world, and (2) travelling ascetics, who cared for the bodily and spiritual needs of widows, orphans, and poor people. The latter group were especially gifted in the reading and interpreting of Scripture. They would visit the homes where Christian ascetics were gathered and hold informal services of worship. Psalms were sung, prayers offered, and the Scriptures read and expounded.³⁴

The infusion into these Scriptural devotions of mystical interests was very largely the work of the Alexandrian theologians of the second and third centuries, Clement and Origen. The picture given by Clement in the seventh book of his *Stromata* (7ff.) of the ideal devotional life of the true Christian Gnostic was remarkably similar to the ideal of worship set forth later by monastic writers. The Gnostic was to pray silently. "Endeavouring to abstract the body from the earth, along with the discourse, raising the soul aloft, winged with longing for better things, we compel it to advance to the region of holiness, magnanimously despising the chain of the flesh." The little day hours, he said, should be observed in the interest of "having fellowship with God." "Prayer, then, may be uttered without the voice, by concentrating the whole spiritual nature within on expression by the mind, in undistracted turning towards God." Added to prayer, there must be study, abstinence from sensual pleasures and upright conduct if one was to reach "an inspired elevation of prayer, being associated gnostically, as far as possible, with intellectual and spiritual objects." The Gnostics' "sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed,

³³ I Tim. 5: 3ff. Cf. Anna of Luke 2: 37, and Ignatius *Ad Smyrnaeos* 13; Polycarp *Epistola* iv. 3. A Jewish precedent in Judith 8: 4ff.

³⁴ i. 10-11; ii. 1-2, 4-6.

and prayers also again during night. By these he unites himself to the divine choir, from continual recollection, engaged in contemplation which has everlasting remembrance."

The same views were repeated by Origen. For example, in his treatise against Celsus, he remarked:

Observe now how by such statements he depreciates those amongst us who are teachers of the word, and who strive in every way to raise the soul to the Creator of all things, and who show that we ought to despise things "sensible," and "temporal," and "visible," and to do our utmost to reach communion with God, and the contemplation of things that are "intelligent," and "invisible," and a blessed life with God, and the friends of God.⁸⁵

In the latter part of his life Origen wrote a treatise on prayer in answer to a question put to him by two friends as to whether prayer was necessary if God had foreknowledge of men's needs. In answering this question he added some remarks upon prayer significant for our enquiry. One should not speak much in prayer, said he, nor ask for trifling or earthly things. All anxiety of mind and disturbing thoughts should be laid aside; for extraneous things hinder the approach to God. "When, then, our mind's eye is thus uplifted so that we are no longer pre-occupied with things of earth or filled with images derived from material things . . . and are solely occupied with the thought of God . . . we converse reverently and modestly with Him who listens to us."⁸⁶ The content of prayer included praise and thanksgiving, confession and petition. But in order that it might lead to the mystic experience, not only the suppression of the world of sense was necessary, but also the Scriptures, which formed the basis of worship both for meditation and for the language of prayer, must be interpreted allegorically.

It is needful to warn those who yearn to lead a spiritual life in Christ that they should not ask for trifling nor merely worldly things when they pray; rather I would exhort readers of this treatise to pray for those mystic things of which we have but types in the things of which I have been speaking. Now prayer for the said spiritual or mystic things is only perfected in him who

⁸⁵ *Contra Celsum* iii. 56 (trans. Crombie).

⁸⁶ *De oratione* 10 (trans. H. Pope, "Origen's Treatise on Prayer," *Ecclesiastical Record*, LX [1919], 633-49).

wars *not according to the flesh*, but who through the Spirit puts to death the things of the flesh, and who makes far more account of what the anagogical sense (of Holy Scripture) will reveal to those who seek it than of any reward which the literal sense (of Scripture) may suggest as likely to accrue to those who pray.³⁷

The writings of Origen were well-known to the early monks and were widely read amongst them. One of the leading monastic theologians of the latter part of the fourth century, Evagrius Ponticus, was a great student and admirer of Origen.³⁸ In the year 399 a tumultuous controversy broke out amongst the monks of lower Egypt as a result of the Paschal letter of Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria, which condemned an anthropomorphic conception of God.³⁹ Simple and unlettered monks, who interpreted the Scriptures literally, considered Genesis 1:26 to teach that God did have corporeal form. Such monks blamed Theophilus with teaching heresy which had been propounded by Origen, namely that God was incorporeal. Origen had said that only man's rational soul, not his body, was the image of God,⁴⁰ and learned monks and "such as had a cultivated mind" (as the historian Socrates put it) likewise interpreted the Scriptures in a "spiritual" sense.

IV

The asceticism and mysticism taught by the Alexandrian fathers, which furnished the ground-work of monastic piety, was the Christian counterpart of a general trend in the religious philosophy of Graeco-Roman times. In circles influenced especially by Platonic and Neopythagorean ideas God had come to be conceived as a Being totally transcendent, purely immaterial, unbegotten, ineffable and incorporeal. As such he was not to be approached by any material or visible sacrifice or offering, nor could he be

³⁷ *Ibid.* 13; cf. *C. Cels.* ii. 6.

³⁸ See the study of W. Bousset, *Apophthegmata. Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen, 1923), Part III.

³⁹ Socrates *Historia ecclesiastica* vi. 7, 9; Sozomen *Hist. eccl.* viii. 11-13; Cassian *Coll.* x. 2-3. See my article, "The Anthropomorphic Controversy in the Time of Theophilus of Alexandria," *Church History* VII (1938), 263-73.

⁴⁰ *C. Cels.* vii. 66; cf. viii. 17-19.

represented or pictured in any form. The only way to him was a flight beyond the senses, beyond even the mind to a communion of pure spirit with Pure Spirit. Such a goal was seldom reached, but it was worth a life-time of training, discipline, study and worship in order to achieve it. So ineffable was the experience that it could only be described in metaphorical terms—silent ecstasy and dazzling light.

This religious outlook reached its acme in paganism in the writings of Plotinus, founder of the Neoplatonic school, who was a native of Egypt and a contemporary and friend of Origen. Plotinus' descriptions of the mystic flight of "the alone to the alone" are too-well known to need detailed exposition here.⁴¹ It should be said, however, that with Plotinus purification from the things of sense necessary to spiritual contemplation was more a discipline of reason than a rule of conduct. Yet the Neoplatonists themselves lived in quite ascetic fashion. Porphyry, the pupil of Plotinus, in his letter to his wife Marcella spoke of the body as simply "the outer covering" of the soul, and "in so far as he refrains from sharing the feelings of the body, in such a measure does he approach the divine."⁴² In his treatise advocating a vegetarian diet, Porphyry described the Neoplatonic ideal of worship:

To the God who is over all, as a certain wise man said, we must neither offer by fire nor dedicate any of the things of sense; for there is no material thing which is not at once impure to the immaterial. Wherefore neither is speech by the outward voice proper to Him, nor even the inward speech, whenever it is defiled by passion of the soul. But we worship Him in pure silence, and with pure thoughts concerning Him. United therefore, and made like to Him, we must offer our own self-discipline as a holy sacrifice to God, the same being both a hymn of praise to Him and salvation to us. Therefore this sacrifice is perfected in passionless serenity of soul and in contemplation of God.⁴³

The "certain wise man" referred to by Porphyry may well have been the famed Neopythagorean of the first century A.D., Apollonius of Tyana. This man was a strange complex of re-

⁴¹ See especially *Enneades* i. 6.7; v. 1.6; vi. 9.11.

⁴² *Ad Marcellam* 32 (trans. Zimmern).

⁴³ *De abstinentia* ii. 34 (trans. Gifford, in Eusebius *Praeparatio evangelica* iv. 11).

ligious practitioner, a wanderer celibate, given to prophetic and wonder-working gifts, and fond of giving gratuitous advice in the many places he visited on matters pertaining to worship. From a quotation of Apollonius preserved by Eusebius it would seem that he opposed all forms of sacrificial worship, whether of animals or plants, and in their stead advocated the use of silent and mental prayer.⁴⁴ His biographer said that he only offered incense.⁴⁵ This he did partly in imitation of Pythagoras, partly because of his belief in some defilement attaching to material things which made them unworthy offerings to God as well as unnecessary to a purely spiritual Being. The idea of defilement inherent in material things traced back to primitive notions of "taboo," which had been rationalized and moralized in the Orphic-Pythagorean movement of the seventh and sixth centuries B. C. and associated also with the belief in the transmigration of souls. It is doubtful, therefore, whether Apollonius' advocacy of silent worship may be taken as indicative of a contemplative and mystical form of religious devotion as Porphyry and the Neoplatonists understood it. The Neoplatonist Iamblichus, who like Porphyry was also addicted to many Pythagorean notions, has left a picture of the daily life and worship of the Neopythagorean sect. They would arise before sunrise and offer prayer to the rising sun. During the morning they meditated in solitude near some temple or grove before assembling to discuss matters of doctrine and behavior. Physical exercise preceded a simple meal of bread and honey. Business matters came up for discussion in the early afternoon, after which they would take walks by twos and threes and discuss further their disciplines. A bath was taken just before the evening meal. Libations and fumigations with incense opened the supper, which consisted of bread, raw and boiled vegetables, and occasionally some sacrificial meat and wine. After supper a service of worship was held. It began with libations. Then the youngest member read to the group at

⁴⁴ *Præp. evang.* iv. 13; *Demonstratio evangelica* iii. 3.

⁴⁵ Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* i. 1, 21; iv. 21; v. 25-6.

the direction of the eldest. Before departing another libation was poured, and the eldest recited the cardinal precepts of the sect:

No mild and fruitful plant or innoxious animal should be injured or corrupted. Speak piously of the divine, demonical and heroic genera, parents and benefactors.

Give assistance to the law.

Before retiring each one examined his conduct during the day. Music was used to compose and purify the soul, and hymns were often sung on going to bed and arising. Dancing was also used occasionally.⁴⁶ In the remains of a subterranean basilica near the Porta Maggiore in Rome the ruins of a Neopythagorean place of assemblage has been discovered. It dates from the reign of Claudius.⁴⁷

From the above description it would appear that Neopythagorean worship was directed not so much towards mystical experiences as to the cultivation of their peculiar philosophical and ethical doctrines. Yet syncretism between this sect and more strict followers of Platonic ideals was common. A good example is the philosopher Numenius of Apamea (end of the second century), of whose work the following fragment has been preserved:

... there is no possibility of conceiving the good from anything that lies before us, nor yet from anything similar that can be perceived by the senses. ... Just so, then, must a man withdraw far from the things of sense, and commune in solitude with the good alone, where there is neither man nor any other living thing, nor body great or small, but a certain immense, indescribable, and absolutely divine solitude, where already the occupations and splendours of the good exist, and the good itself, in peace and benevolence, that gentle, gracious, guiding power, sits high above all being.⁴⁸

Another form of philosophical and religious syncretism, strongly colored with Platonic mysticism, was Hermeticism, whose literature was contemporary with early Christianity. The movement was native to Egypt. In the first tractate *Asclepius* one is told that man is of a double nature, divine and human, and

⁴⁶ Iamblichus *Vita Pythagorica* 96 ff., 256.

⁴⁷ See J. Carcopino, *La Basilique Pythagoricienne de la Porte Majeure* (Paris, 1926).

⁴⁸ Eusebius *Præp. evang.* xi. 22; cf. xi. 18.

as such has two duties. "He raises reverent eyes to heaven above; he tends the earth below." His soul, which is his divine part, is "single and undivided," "incorporeal and eternal," formed in the likeness of God. His body, which shelters the divine soul, is "fourfold, and material." The Muses were sent to earth to teach men's souls the tendance of heaven in hymns of praise. For to Hermetic ways of thinking the only sacrifices God accepts are the "rational sacrifices" of praise and thanksgiving.⁴⁹ The right regulation of the two parts of man's nature

. . . consists first and chiefly in piety; and piety is accompanied by goodness. But goodness is to be seen in its perfection only when man's virtue is fortified against desire, and he scorns all things that are alien to him. Now all earthly things which man holds in his possession to gratify his bodily desires are alien to all that part of his nature which is akin to God.⁵⁰

Here, then, is stated the ascetic groundwork. The reward of such piety is immortality, which is equivalent to knowledge of God. "For to worship God in thought and spirit with singleness of heart, to revere God in all his works, and to give thanks to God, whose will, and his alone, is wholly filled with goodness—this is philosophy unsullied by intrusive cravings for unprofitable knowledge."⁵¹

The Hermeticists distinguished two classes of gods; the higher ones, who ruled all the world of material things, were apprehensible by thought alone. God the Father and Master over all was higher than all human utterance, for no name could describe him.⁵² Men, so far as their minds were able, might see "through dark mist" the things of heaven, and "great is man's happiness when he has seen that vision."⁵³

But in this life we are still too weak to see that sight; we have not strength to open our mental eyes, and to behold the beauty of the Good, that incorruptible beauty which no tongue can tell. Then only will you see it, when you cannot

⁴⁹ Cf. *Poimandres* 31-32. I have used the edition of W. Scott, *Hermetica* (Oxford, 1924-36), 4 vols.

⁵⁰ *Asclepius* i. 11a.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 14a.

⁵² *Ibid.* iii. 20a.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 32b.

speak of it; for the knowledge of it is deep silence, and suppression of all the senses. He who has apprehended the beauty of the Good can apprehend nothing else; he who has seen it can see nothing else; he cannot hear speech about aught else; he cannot move his body at all; he forgets all bodily sensations and all bodily movements, and is still. But the beauty of the Good bathes his mind in light, and takes all his soul up to itself, and draws it forth from the body, and changes the whole man into eternal substance.⁵⁴

Mysticism even invaded the ranks of the Stoics. These philosophers were given to practices of asceticism as an aid in the cultivation of indifference to all outward circumstances of life which tended to destroy calm and peace of mind. But such asceticism had only a practical bent and with religious interests had little to do. Their discipline was one of rationality rather than of piety. One of their cardinal doctrines was the essential kinship of the human soul with reality. The spark which flamed in each individual's breast was no different from the rational Nature which manifested itself in the fiery order of celestial bodies. Thus the path was left open for the cultivation of "astral mysticism."⁵⁵ The source of astral religion was ancient Babylonia. It passed to the western world largely through the influence of the Stoic philosopher Poseidonius of Apamea (born *ca.* 135 B.C.).

It is not difficult to see how the emotions aroused by the varied beauty and constant harmony of movement among the heavenly bodies, when combined with belief in their relationship to the human soul and reason, would find in the contemplation of the sky a means of communion with the divine order displayed in it. Since the ecstasy induced by this type of contemplation was of an intellectual sort, it is furthermore not surprising to find it linked with ideas of a quite definitely ascetic sort. Such sublime research rose of necessity above all earthly goods. The well-known Alexandrian astronomer of the second century, Ptolemy, has a stanza:

⁵⁴ *Corpus Hermeticum* x. 5-6.

⁵⁵ For pertinent sources see Cumont's article, "Le Mysticisme astral dans l'Antiquité," *Bulletins de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques et de la Classe des Beaux-Arts*, Académie royale de Belgique, 1909, pp. 256-86.

I know that mortal though I be and for a day, yet when I trace out the serried stars in their circular courses, my feet no longer touch the surface of the earth, but I am satiated with ambrosia in the presence of Zeus himself, nourisher of the gods.⁵⁶

Another testimony comes from the astronomer Vettius Valens:

Men tracing out the heavenly circuit and the movements of the stars and the courses of the Sun and Moon and the divisions of the years and months and seasons, and the tempers and changes, the contacts and effluxes of the air would seem from such knowledge to partake in and for a time commune with the gods. . . . Hermes leads the souls of men on high about the starry firmament, surrounding them with ecstatic and natural thoughts, especially those who are reverently zealous concerning these things.⁵⁷

The close association of these ideas with Stoic ways of thinking is well illustrated by Vettius Valens' remarks on prayer: "For it is impossible for any man by prayers or sacrifices to overcome what was fixed from the beginning and alter it to his taste; what has been assigned to us will happen without our praying for it, what is not fated will not happen for our prayers."⁵⁸

Contemporary with the very beginnings of Christian monasticism itself was the astronomer Firmicus Maternus. In the preface to the eighth book of his *Mathesis*, he opened by saying:

We ought to labor for nothing else in this brief mortal life, O excellent Mavortius, than that purged from pollution of the earthly body, and all vices, or at least most of them, discarded as far as possible, we should render to God our maker the divinity of our soul, incorrupt and polluted by no taint of evils, lest we lose our soul as unmindful of its divine creator and involved in the vicious snares of passions, thrown headlong to perdition, as it were. . . . But we ought not at all to cogitate upon earthly things, especially since we know God our maker to have fashioned us by the guidance of the divine artificer, that, by means of an upright form of body, banished from all mean dejection and exposed with clear eyes only to the sun, moon, stars and their most beautiful and immortal abode, we might gaze upon the universe. . . . Look, therefore, my excellent Mavortius, with open eyes to heaven, and let your soul ever behold that most beautiful fabrication of divine labor. For then our mind, formed by the recollection of its majesty, may be freed from depraved bodily allurements, and divested of mortal inconveniences, and strive towards its maker with hastened step, and through every hour with wise and ever vigilant enquiry seek nothing

⁵⁶ *Anthologia Palatina* ix. 577.

⁵⁷ *Anthologiae* ix. 8 (ed. Kroll, p. 346).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* v. 9 (p. 220).

except divine things. . . . For always occupied with divine disputations, applying our soul to the celestial powers, and consecrating it with divine ceremonies, we are separated from all desires of base passions.

One might easily take this passage—astronomical references excluded—as coming from the pen of a Christian monk.

The conception of worship in terms of mystical aspiration, as found in the literature of Gentile religious philosophy here reviewed, paralleled very closely the theory of worship outlined in monastic writers. The principal difference lay in the instruments used in worship. For there was nothing in Gentile piety comparable to Jewish-Christian sacred Scripture. The astral mystics, for example, studied the courses of the heavens rather than the words of a sacred text. The Hermeticists were given to a "rational sacrifice" of praise and thanksgiving, but there was little or nothing of confession or intercession in their prayers, two very characteristic marks of Jewish and Christian devotion. The same might be said concerning the Neoplatonists. It is of interest that much of this mysticism was native to or largely cultivated upon Egyptian soil. Hermeticism was native to Egypt; and astral mysticism, Neopythagoreanism and Neoplatonism had close ties with the milieu of Alexandria. The developing Christian movement did not escape the influence of these religious philosophies, and into the traditions of Scriptural devotion inherited from her Jewish parent, the desire for a new kind of worship experience, contemplative and other-worldly, sought expression. This was made possible during the course of the second and third centuries by the expansion of Christian theology to include attributes of passionlessness, formlessness, and ineffability to the Godhead, and by the development of an allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures. In these changes a principal rôle was played by the Christian thinkers who were most closely linked with the land of Egypt, Clement and Origen.

